DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 739 CG 016 144

AUTHOR Keller, John W.; And Others
TITLE Perspectives on Death: A Developmental Study.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (28th, New Orleans, LA, March 24-27, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Affective Measures; *Age Differences; *Anxiety; Attitude Measures; Comparative Analysis; *Death; Factor Analysis; *Fear; *Religious Factors; *Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

While prior research has focused on death anxiety in general, more recent studies have recognized the need for multilevel measures for assessing the fear of death. A 12-item questionnaire was used to produce three factors: evaluation of death in general, belief in the hereafter, and death anxiety related to self. The study sample consisted of 901 subjects from young adults to older adults. Data showed that middle-age and late-middle-age persons were significantly less anxious in regard to "evaluation of death in general" than their older and younger counterparts. Old-age groups showed the least anxiety toward death anxiety related to self. Future research should differentiate between the concept of death and the process of dying. (Author/JAC)

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PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH: A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY

John W. Keller
Dave Sherry
Chris Piotrowski

University of West Florida

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PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH: A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY

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Over the past decade the scientific literature (Becker, 1973; Feifel & Nagy, 1981; Schneidman, 1976; Templer, 1970), appears to reflect an increasing interest in various perspectives on death and dying. Much attention has focused and the emotional and cognitive components in confronting death, such as "death fear", "death anxiety" and "death threat". However, thanatology has tended to resort to findings obtained solely from college student populations. Moreover, there is a dearth of research on developmental changes in attitudes toward death. The purpose of the present study is twofold:

(1) To identify various dimensions (via factor analysis) of the concept of death.

(2) To view the developmental differences in these dimensions for age groups and for sex.

The total population consisted of 901 subjects, ranging in age from 18 to 87. For diversity, subjects were obtained from various sources: a junior college, an upper-level university, organizations for the aged, business groups, and personal contacts (see graph for age distributions).

A 12 item questionnaire (hereon, DQ) purporting to measure attitudes toward death was constructed and a Likert type format was used. All responses on the DQ were factor analyzed by the principal components method with varimax rotation. Factor loadings of $\pm$ .50 or greater were considered significant for inclusion on a factor. The rotated factor pattern produced three factors. Factor I consisted of five items dealing with general attitudes toward death and was labeled "evaluation of death". Factor II consisted of three items referring to a belief in life after death and was labelled "belief in hereafter". Factor III was composed of four items which dealt with one's own perspective toward the death process and was labeled "death anxiety related to self".

Factor scores were computed for each respondent for each of the three factors and a two-way analysis of variance was performed on each factor with sex and age as the two independent variables. The statements on the questionnaire were worded in such a way that high factor scores on Factor I and Factor III corresponded to being less "anxious" about death and a low score on Factor II corresponded to a stronger belief in the hereafter.

In all three analyses of variance, there was no significant interaction between sex and age. There was no difference by sex for Factor I, "Evaluation of Death". On the second factor, "Belief in the Hereafter", females expressed a significantly greater belief in the hereafter than males. For "Death Anxiety Related to Self" (Factor III) females were significantly more anxious than males.

In regard to age, Duncan's test was used to test for differences. It was found that middle-age and late middle-age persons were less anxious relative to Factor I, "Evaluation of Death," than were their younger and older counterparts. (see graph). Perhaps individuals in this age range have tendencies to deny the threat of death via sublimated activities such as work, career and family life (Becker, 1973). The profiles of the graphs of Factor I and Factor II by age are quite similar with high scores occuring for middle-age and late middle-age individuals. As far as statistical significance for Factor II, it can only be concluded that the 60 and over group is, on the average, more religious than the middle-age and late middle-age groups.

Interestingly, the old-age group was significantly less anxious about "Death Relating to Self" (Factor III) than their younger counterparts. While individuals in this group are less anxious about their own death (Factor III), they are among the most anxious about death in general (Factor I). Perhaps, with increasing age, they can accept the inevitability of their own death but they are still concerned about death relative to society in general. It can be concluded that the 60 and over group is less anxious about their own death than all of the other groups except the middle-aged. In addition, some implications for future research were noted; notably, differences between the concept of death and the process of dying should be differentiated and researched.

Table I

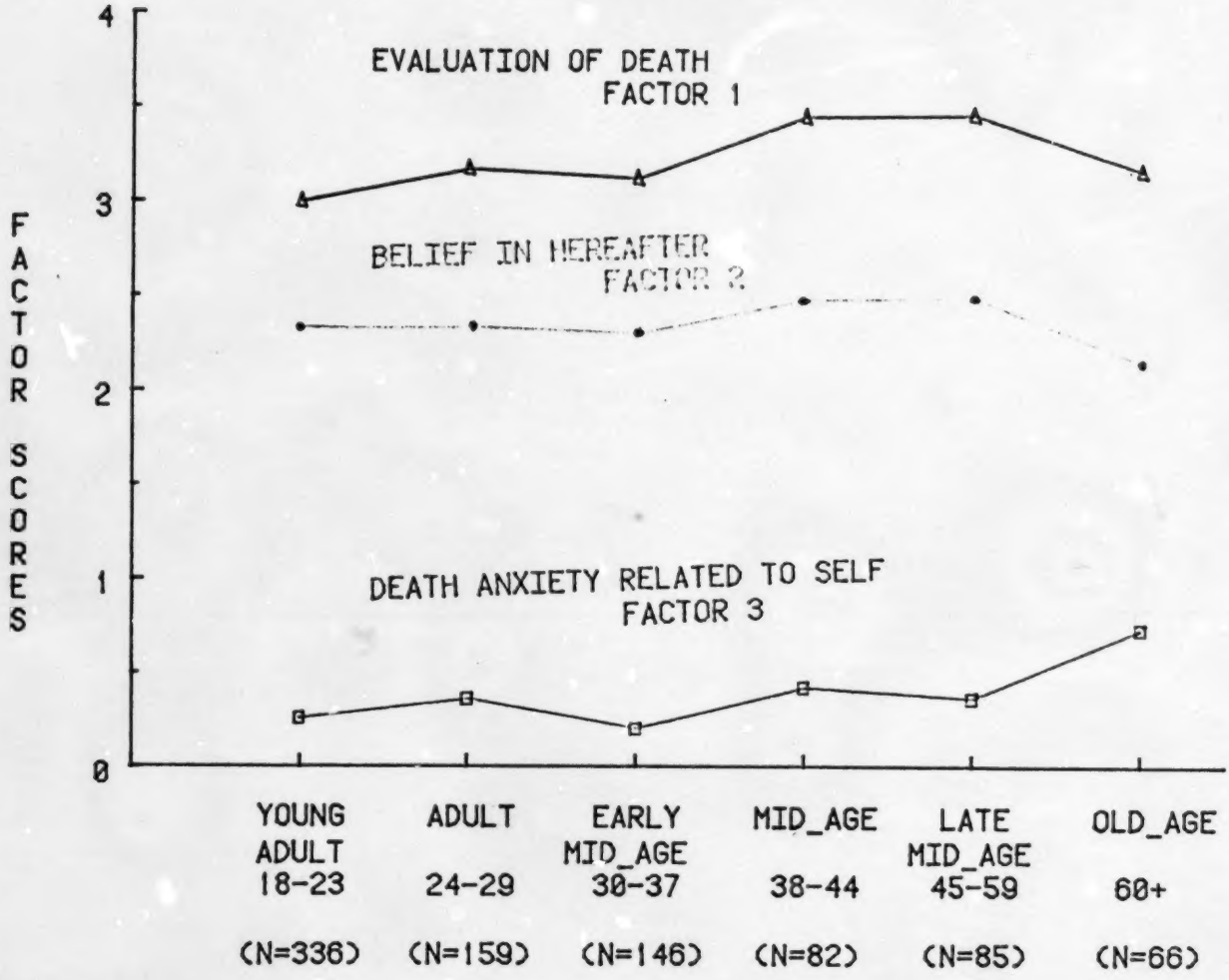
Analysis of Variance

Source of Variability	F-Values (Factor I) Evaluation of Death	(Factor II) Belief in Hereafter	(Factor III) Death Anxiety Related to Self
Age	6.61**	2.40*	2.78*
Sex	N.S	13.13**	29.10**
Age x Sex	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.

* - significant at α = .05.

** - significant at α = .01.

PROFILE OF FACTOR SCORES



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